

Research Note

Investigating Approaches to the Teaching of Research on Undergraduate Social Work Programmes: A Research Note

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a scoping review of curriculum delivery methods for research teaching in undergraduate social work education. The review was conducted by a working group of the JUC SWEC research committee following the introduction of a new degree by the Social Work Reform Board. The paper draws on data from a mixed-methods study, in which five models of research teaching were identified by a qualitative study, together with findings, which mapped how commonly the models were adopted, from a survey of sixty universities of all four countries of the UK. These models are discussed in relation to anticipated learning outcomes: research-informed teaching; educated consumers of research; research-mindedness; research capacity and reflective practitioner researchers. It is less than a decade since the Economic and Social Research Council (the government research council for the social sciences) first recognised social work as a distinct discipline; in this period, social work educators have taken innovative approaches to underpin teaching and practice learning by research. The study implications are that a larger study should provide evidence for the learning outcomes associated with different approaches.

Keywords: research, education, capacity, practice

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Background

The ability to locate, understand and use research is vital for social work: it informs decision making about appropriate interventions and contributes

evidence about what works. With the introduction of a degree in 2003, the expectation was that an academic regulatory framework would enhance the professionalisation of social work and increase its rigour and standing. Over the past decade, there has indeed been increasing recognition of research's pivotal role in establishing social work's status (Lyons, 2000). Considerable energy has been dedicated to developing research capacity and excellence in academic social work, such as the recognition of social work as a distinct discipline by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2006, the development of a social work research strategy (Bywaters, 2008) and capacity building through Researcher Development Initiatives (Powell and Orme, 2011). But the tragic death of Peter Connolly led to a reform of social work education and differing expectations about students' practical, analytical and report-writing skills (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2013). These multifaceted requirements compete for attention in what is widely acknowledged to be a 'packed curriculum' (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013, p. 696). The challenge for social work education is the effective application of research findings to underpin decision making in social work practice.

The mandate for the inclusion of research teaching on social work curricula

Debates about the place of research in social work education have international relevance (Berger, 2002; Lorenz, 2003; Beddoe, 2011). For example, in 2004, the International Association of Schools of Social Work launched its Global Standards for Social Work Education which specify 'knowledge . . . and skills in the use of research methods, including ethical use of relevant research paradigms, and critical appreciation of the use of research' (http://cdn.ifsw.org/assets/ifsw_65044-3.pdf, p. 7). Furthermore, the case has been widely made by numerous reviews of UK social work education and, in all of the current standards, there is clear emphasis on research-informed practice.

Curricula developments

Alongside the capacity-building initiatives outlined earlier, the past decade has seen a number of developments including The College of Social Work (TCSW) curriculum guide, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) web pages and a burgeoning number of student-focused texts (e.g. McLaughlin, 2012).

Following the reform of social work education in England in 2012, concern about the scope and inclusion of research teaching in the new curriculum led the JUC SWEC research committee to initiate a small unfunded scoping review of undergraduate programmes in the four countries of the UK.

Research method

The project aimed to investigate delivery approaches to research teaching, specifically on undergraduate qualifying programmes, building on models identified in the ESRC-funded audit of research teaching (Orme *et al.*, 2008). It was launched with a scoping document which identified the protocol for the working group and regular reporting to the JUC SWEC research sub-committee took place throughout. In early 2013, a pilot study collected qualitative data about course aims, content and delivery of research methods teaching from nine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), identified through a general call to the membership of the research committee; this was supplemented by a search of HEI websites where details from a further five HEIs were obtained. Drawing on the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), these existing data were examined and five approaches to research teaching were devised. This brief e-mail questionnaire survey collected data from March to November 2013 and simply asked which model(s) informed the teaching of the HEI was undertaken of undergraduate qualifying programmes (a total of eighty-three institutions) identified through *The Guardian* university league tables. Nine of these institutions were in Scotland, three in Wales, three in Northern Ireland and sixty-eight in England. Discounting ten institutions where social work is either no longer offered or only post-graduate programmes are available, responses were received from sixty HEIs, which represents a response rate of 72 per cent.

Findings

Pilot study

The qualitative phase of the study identified common approaches to research teaching and these are exemplified in the five models below:

- (1) Research permeates the social work curriculum. Students may be required to undertake a specific piece of work, as part of their placement, for example, where they link research to practice or use research to help them to identify an evidence-based intervention.
- (2) Students are taught a discrete module on social work research methods and methodologies. In this model, students critically appraise published research or undertake a literature review.
- (3) Students are taught a module on research which requires them to prepare a research proposal for a chosen topic of study. Students may identify ethical issues and prepare a participant information sheet.
- (4) Students are taught a module on research which requires them to undertake a dissertation. Students design a study, undertake a literature review and may conduct secondary analysis (i.e. on existing data).

- (5) Students are required to undertake an empirical dissertation with social workers, other professionals, service users or carers.
- (6) Any other model (participants gave qualitative responses) (not discussed below).

This preliminary work enabled the development of five approaches to research teaching which formed the basis of the survey questionnaire.

Survey

The survey findings suggest that the models illustrate core approaches to research teaching: only one institution reported that they did not use any of the five models identified. The models were not presented as mutually exclusive and responses showed that the approach taken by most HEIs was to use a combination. Findings illustrate that universities take innovative approaches to including research in the social work curriculum, with models 1 and 2 being most commonly combined.

Discussion

Following Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014), this scoping review has sought to clarify concepts to refine subsequent research. Previous studies have identified approaches where methods training reflects a 'broader social science orientation to research' (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013, p. 692) rather than developing its relationship to practice. Although this had been our assumption in undertaking this scoping review, in the curricula examples provided, practice relevance was embedded. In the following discussion, the models are entitled with the anticipated learning outcomes or teaching approaches.

Research-informed teaching

This approach (model 1), where research permeates the curriculum, was adopted by 23 per cent of respondents and it emphasises breadth rather than depth. It may be characterised by modules, for example, in child development or social work skills which are underpinned by research evidence about patterns of attachment or risk assessment in safeguarding adults. In an example of an assessment for this model, students are required to discuss how research informs their practice with a service user in their first practice learning opportunity (PLO) and, in their second PLO, they are required to conduct a review of the literature related to an issue arising in their placement. In this model, students demonstrate the ability to use research to inform their understanding of issues pertinent to social work. Only two institutions relied exclusively on this model; however, a quarter of institutions reported that they included this model in their overall

approach. Without a dedicated research module, this begs interesting questions about how students were able to acquire the necessary skills in searching for and critically evaluating research.

Educated consumers of research

This second model features on 35 per cent of programmes where students are taught a discrete module which equips them to locate relevant journals, critically appraise the literature and gain understanding of research paradigms and methods. An example of an assessment requires two assignments each involving the critical analysis of a published piece of research and a statement of the relevance of the findings for social work practice. Learning outcomes include: understanding the processes by which practitioners may critically appraise and then incorporate research findings into their work, awareness of the range of research methods available, and appreciation of some of their respective strengths and weaknesses. This approach equips students with the necessary skills and knowledge in research while academic learning is linked to practice through the choice of topics. Curricula standards in the USA emphasise its tenets (Hardcastle and Bisman, 2003) and, arguably, this approach best meets the relevant criteria in the Professional Capabilities Framework in England and the Health and Care Professions Council standards.

Research-mindedness

Research-mindedness (adopted by 19 per cent of programmes) is a concept recognised in learning resources including a Higher Education Academy resource, TCSW curriculum guide and the SCIE web pages (Taylor and Rafferty, 2003). It is characterised by critical reflection, an understanding of the process of research and, in distinction from the two preceding models, the use of social work values to 'counter discrimination and oppression' incorporating an understanding of ethical principles (www.scie.org.uk/publications/researchmindedness/whyrm/definingrm/index.asp, accessed 17 November 2014).

Research-mindedness then appears to characterise learning outcomes in a third model of research teaching where students prepare a proposal on a topic for study, identify ethical issues arising in the research and possibly prepare a participant information sheet.

On some programmes, this model is offered as a stand-alone approach, while, on others, it is offered in level 2 of the programme in preparation for a dissertation in level 3. In the curricula examples, this approach encourages the application of research and evaluation methods to social work practice as well as developing skills of critical analysis and evaluating competing evidence in the development of a convincing argument.

Research capacity

Research capacity, which characterises 35 per cent of programmes, describes students' competence, skills and knowledge of research. In programmes adopting this approach, students are taught two modules: on research methodologies and a second which requires them to undertake a dissertation. There are a number of permutations in this approach: on some programmes, an extended literature research-based dissertation is required which includes research design and methodology and ethical considerations. Elsewhere, this model is adopted by HEIs to embed understanding of quantitative approaches where the dissertation includes secondary data analysis to promote understanding of statistics. Previous authors have polarised the benefits of quantitative and qualitative research paradigms: the tradition in the USA has adopted the former, while, in the UK, the latter has been the preferred approach (Hardcastle and Bisman, 2003). In order to develop the evidence base in social work and widen the kinds of enquiries undertaken, both research paradigms should underpin research teaching and learning.

Reflective practitioner researchers

According to Hardcastle and Bisman (2003), this model has informed teaching for over a quarter of a century where the focus is to teach students to become practitioner researchers and where the needs of practice should drive research. Students gain skills in producing a research proposal, applying for ethical approval, designing and implementing an empirical project with service users, carers or social workers related to practice. In this model, (adopted by 6 per cent of programmes), students become producers, rather than just consumers, of knowledge and the approach is infused by experiential learning. Students are required to plan a research project which demonstrates awareness of ethical issues in social work research and which is consistent with professional codes of practice, and take responsibility for their own acquisition of research knowledge and skills relevant to continuing professional development.

Conclusion

One of the motivations for undertaking this scoping study was to ascertain whether the amount of research teaching in undergraduate social work education had reduced from the General Social Care Council registered 2003 programme to the TCSW 2012 programme. The findings reveal that the extent to which research permeates the curriculum has reduced from 32 per cent of programmes to 23 per cent while the number of institutions

offering a specific module has remained fairly constant at 32 per cent in the ESRC audit and 35 per cent in the current study. There are some important differences between the two studies: the ESRC audit included M-level qualifying programmes and the models identified somewhat differed. By contrast to the findings from the ESRC audit, where a 'marked lack of social work research literature' (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013, p. 692) was noted, the core texts cited in curricula outlines were from the newly emerging social work research literature.

But this project raises a number of important questions about approaches to teaching. As Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014) highlight, we do not yet know what the impact of contrasting curricula approaches are for learning outcomes: future research is needed to illuminate the benefits. Moreover, despite these encouraging preliminary findings, qualitative feedback from respondents suggested that HEIs were indeed reducing the amount of time dedicated to research on undergraduate programmes, but these data were not systematically collected in this study. The analysis suggests that, within a decade, the place of research teaching is widely recognised in social work education, but external factors, such as the drive to deliver workplace-based social work training through the Step-Up to social work programme or Front-line, may severely limit the ability to develop research knowledge and skills in social work education. The implications of these competing forces mean that educators and practitioners need to continue to argue for a curriculum that is underpinned by research.

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